

Looking at the total media surround [draft]

Text on Method, Felix Obermaier

My work is situated within the question on how reality is perceived and shaped and when it becomes simulation or when simulation becomes reality. Human perception and the subsequent actions today take place in an extensive media surround. From traditional media throughout the Internet, personal communication and public spaces, we are confronted with a mediated stream of information, especially in visual form. With technological progress, formerly separated channels are even merging, causing the media surround to spread almost infinitely. The surround is working as a feedback mechanism: Sequent iterations of information, communication and actions and are abstracting the content and the perception from the world, becoming a Simulacrum¹.

My research is exploring how to communicate outside of, respectively without the media surround, which my practical work aims to do. The work consists of two strands of method that are distinct but overlapping occasionally: a photographic practice and image curating. Both are supported by theoretical and contemporary readings that sharpen the practices.

Photographic practice

In my photographic practice, I am on search for traces and effects of the media surround in the public. I survey the public space around me and photographically capture scenes of objects, images or the space and what it is made of itself. The captured scenes are what is commonly encountered in the public, like fragments of architecture, urban planning, advertisements, shops, decoration. They are human-made, with a specific aim and essentially giving the depicted scene its Gestalt. But they are also things, that contain a high amount of information² to accomplish their destined purpose. It is deriving from the concepts of nature, well-being, fashion or consumerism, that are becoming the subjects of the public as well as the photographs.

With the camera, I frame the scenes towards the specific subject. By this, the subjects become imprinted in an image, using similar methods as in the depicted scenes: The photograph (Fig. 1) showing a large-scale print of an ivy plant, that is being used to cover a building and to create a natural appeal, prima facie, appears to be a photograph of an

¹ Baudrillard (2004)

² "Inform: 1. create improbable combinations of elements; 2. imprint them upon objects. | Information: an improbable combination of elements.", Flusser (1983)

actual ivy vegetated wall. It is creating the same illusion as the original print that is photographed does and playing with it. The illusion here becomes figurative for the question of reality.



Fig. 1

Print of ivy in public space to cover architecture and create a natural appeal.

The photographs often contain several visual layers: Depth layers, by virtue of the depicted space or architecture, light reflections, transparencies of glass or windows, images within, or details of materiality. These layers are interplaying with each other, creating and strengthening the ironic appeal of the scenes (Fig. 2). The layers are referring to the virtual layers of abstraction in the scenes, reflecting several possible interpretations of the same space that come together in the single image (Fig. 3). This is eventually encouraging the question of “real or hyper-real³”.



Fig. 2 (left)

Schadow of a presumably real tree on the concret and artificial print of fake leaves.

Fig. 3 (right)

Visual layers used to uncover the fake leaves of ivy: The leaves itself, the print and material it is printed on, the folds of the material, in use with the sunlight creating shadows, and highlights of the reflection.

³ Eco (1983)

Adding to this is the reproduction as a photographic print, that is autonomically creating new proportions of scale, differing to the real-world experience. First scaling it down on the surface of the photographic film respectively the digital sensor and later scaling it up, possibly enlarging objects. For the exhibition of the photographs, I plan to exhaust the possibilities of blowing-up the scenes, taking up on the large-format prints used for advertising or decoration in the public space (Fig. 4, 5), as well as scaling objects down. This shall further isolate scenes and make them figurative.



Fig. 4 (left)

Large-format print used in public space with tomatoes scaled up increasingly.

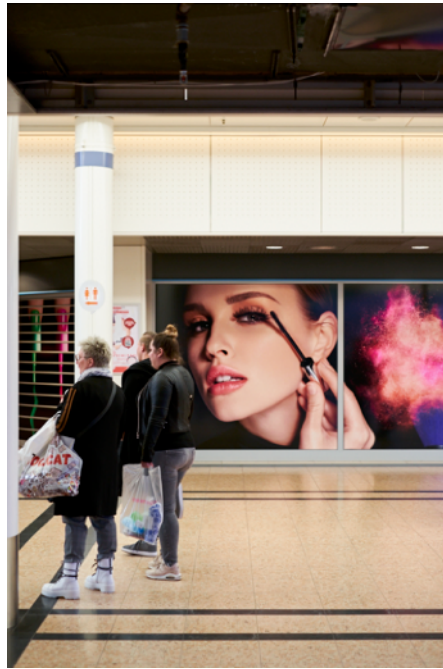


Fig. 5 (right)

Large-format print used in retail space with woman as a commercial beauty-ideal scaled up, defining the space.

By taking a scene from the public space and putting it in form of the photograph in a neutral space (such as a book or gallery), that sits outside the medial surround of the public space, I make the specific subject accessible and am able to outline its figurative function. Also, it provides for re-contextualisation and bringing several separated subjects together to outline their commonalities. Exemplarily, the observation of semi-public/private spaces, that I realised in the photographic series *New New Home* and made into a photo book *“Wohnen”* (Fig. 6): These photographs inhere a passive appearance of human-beings, visible through the corollary of their actions like the placement of objects or architectural elements that communicate something about the human needs and wishes. By framing I create photographs of visual sobriety with a subtle reference to a human naivety. This is leading to a strange, humorist image that is representing the contemporary. The form of presentation is aiming to add to this by abstracting the series in a catalogue-style, making the encrypted human wishes available to choose from. The familiarity in the depicted in turn points back to the viewers own inner thoughts and resulting outer behaviour, subconsciously approaching the viewer.

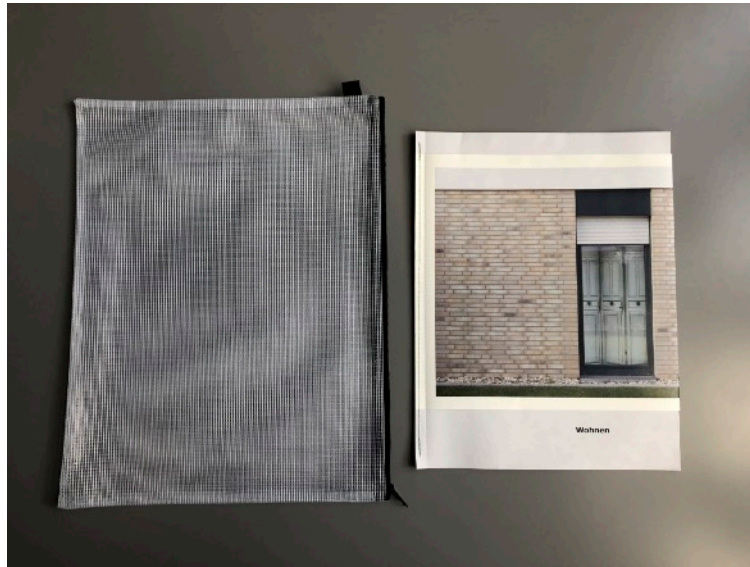


Fig. 6 a, b, c

left: cover of "Wohnen"
right: two inner pages

The architectural photography project New New Home (I + II + "Wohnen") is a long term project of whose images were exhibited in the past. It is related to the current research, in that it was exploring what is implied in a specific way of forming spaces. New New Home II is the second installation. Two images (Fig. 7, 8), one showing a new, modern brick-wall with a door-sized, full-height window that is fully covered by a paravent with the print of a historic door on it on the inside. The other showing the end of a new built, semi-private garden with a wall as a closing, and small garden gates to the private lawns that are also divided through small hedges.

The photographs are made at shady daylight with a normal lens on a medium format camera. The lines of the architecture are kept straight. Technically this creates a neutral and seemingly objective aesthetics and for that is intended to look as realistic as possible. Contrary to that the captured scenes appeal surrealistic and quirky, because of, in the first picture, the style and the positioning in front of the windows by the resident, and in the second, the layout of the gardens that seem to mainly exist of different divisions of the

space. The large formats that make the recipient nearly stand in the scene exaggerate the appeal even more.

Showing explicitly new built and contemporary residential spaces, the photographs inhere a familiarity but are framed to concentrate on the quirkiness of the scenes. This is referring to the infantile humanity and a zeitgeist that were used to create the spaces.



Fig. 7 (left)

Fig. 8 (right)

Theoretical research

To the overall researched question on how reality is created, perceived and how far it is simulation, or how real simulation is, leads the following:

Baudrillard describes in his text “The possession of Simulacra” his thesis of four stages of simulations and how the contemporary society uses it to produce its perception of reality. He claims that contemporary reality is its own simulacrum, with no reference to the real and with no strong meaning. Whereas in earlier historical periods a simulation was clearly visible as such of the real, through mass medias ability of reproduction, it later was capable of creating an own reality. This is exaggerated nowadays when this kind of simulations suppress the profound reality.

The simulation is happening in four stages: In the first one, the image is a clear copy of some reality, Symbols refer to it. For the second, the image is a copy that is referring to the

real but creating its own interpretation of it. The third is depicting a non-real. The fourth is not relating to some reality at all but to its own simulacrum.⁴

What Baudrillard describes can increasingly be seen in the Internet as it is today. Analogue to the camera apparatus Flusser describes in "Towards a Philosophy to Photography"⁵, the Internet of today can be seen as an apparatus: Briefly, it is consisting of set programmes within the user can inform objects or information and distribute it. Distinct to the apparatus is, that it is programmed as a feedback system, encouraging the symbols it uses to repeat all over, letting them become simulacrae.

In "The democratic surround" Fred Turner describes American sociologist's and artist's undertakings during World War II to find a way to mediate a specific mindset using the recipients own mind when exposed to a surround of images or information⁶. Even when military interests decreased, the idea of a democratic surround, that is capable of freeing the individual and strengthening his mind, made its way to the cyberculture and can be found today in how the internet works⁷.

To have an overview about the contemporary practices and images in the total media surround, to conceive the influence of technology on them as well as to support my photographic work, I am in the second strand of my practice, collecting/curating images: I am capturing images from online media or found in the physical public space that interest me, because within them they are clearly indicating, advertising for, or making use of current (communication) technologies or evolving from the medial surround that is a product of the technologies. I save them digitally from the internet or take photographic images of them, when found in the physical world. Subjects, form and extent vary much.

This practice, I am also undertaking for a longer time and it resulted in my 2017 work "Beyond". This is using the previously learned aesthetics used by technology to create an installation and iOS software, working with the very same pictorial language in an exaggerated minimalistic way while providing an ironic application. As a critical design, it is exposing a dystopic present and future, including the societal effects of technology and its obscure design (Fig. 9).

⁴ Baudrillard (2004)

⁵ Flusser (1983)

⁶ Turner (2013)

⁷ Turner (2006)



Fig. 9

Installation "Beyond", 2017

Continuation of the work

The photographic work will be continued and specified, later curated. As a next step it is planned to be used to create an installation (or installations) that is exploring the implications of the reproduction, recombination and resizing. A graphical, figurative translation of the research question to the space is proposed.

With the collected material, representing the media surround, I am trying to find out if and what it can be used for within the context of the researched question. The collection needs to be extended and refined, later possibly used to communicate in a spatial context.

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